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ABSTRACT

Observations are offered on the curriculum of American higher education. It is noted that the curriculum is a major part of an institution's statement about itself, and the societal impact of higher education is likely to be determined more by the kind of people college graduates become than by what they know when they leave college. The historical development of the "major" concept is traced from the last century and recent changes in orientation of curriculum to "outcomes" are discussed. The need to re-examine major programs for relevancy and to find a place for general education courses is presented. It is the area of general education that lends itself to teaching those deficiencies common among college students--lack of verbal and quantitative skills. The changes in general education at North Dakota University demonstrate the kind of reform that addresses the deficiencies. The strategy there was one of "overall thought but piecemeal action," which allowed for change altered as new understanding was acquired. Four models that promote this approach are outlined. (Author/PHR)

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Changing the Non-Major Curriculum

Reflections on Process

Gregg F. Lacy

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Even though recent educators, social and behavioral scholars, literary critics, philosophers, and others have examined, analyzed, and fully described the curricular strengths and weaknesses of American higher education, the mountains of words have had a molehill of an effect in the unraveling of the mysteries of this long, complicated, still developing tradition. "The American college or university is a prototypic organized anarchy. It does not know what it is doing. Its goals are either vague or in dispute. Its technology is familiar but not understood. Its major participants wander in and out of the organization. These factors do not make a university a bad organization or a disorganized one; but they do make it a problem to describe, understand, and lead."[1] I would be guilty of the highest degree of pretentiousness if I expected three thousand U. S. colleges and universities to modify suddenly their deeply entrenched and often very individualistic curricular practices because of one reflective essay. I do hope, nevertheless, that certain observations and their resultant conclusions may be of some benefit to a few institutions which may attempt to cope with some curricular problems.

A college or university curriculum inevitably plays a principal role in the communication of any institution's purpose to its broader constituency: "The curriculum is the major statement any institution makes about itself,

HE 012 032

about what it can contribute to the intellectual development of students, about what it thinks is important in its teaching service to society."[2] An institution does not find it difficult in most cases to prepare a statement about its curriculum; it does find it difficult, however, to evaluate the broadest impact of its curriculum. The effectiveness of some implied or even stated curricular outcomes may be readily studied (e.g., preparation for certain specific professions); other kinds of outcomes may not show their value until much later in an individual's life (e.g., certain cultural awarenesses or higher cognitive skills, such as perception and synthesis): "The societal impact of college-educated people does not necessarily operate through a simple and direct transference to society of what is learned in college. Rather, the societal impact of higher education is likely to be determined more by the kind of people college graduates become than by what they know when they leave college."[3] When an institution cannot measure easily the results of its curriculum as implemented, one can only ask how, then, can it effectively plan for changing circumstances and needs?

One obvious answer is that higher education in America, not unlike most social institutions, has great difficulty in planning its own future, because of the highly complex and random array of factors which bombard it and which evolve its anarchical character in unforeseen manners. A sensitivity to these external social, political, and cultural elements, especially in recent years of rapid growth, tends to preclude any serious attempt by higher education to examine the integration of its many curricular parts, each coming from widely dispersed traditions. Not only has this social institution been unable to identify who takes the responsibility for the integration of the various parts of a curriculum into a meaningful whole, it cannot even develop a good perspective of their collective function: "Faculty members pay attention

to their individual courses, departments to their majors, and students to their choice of electives; but few persons, and sometimes none, pay attention to . . . the overall enterprise."[4] This lack of responsibility and perspective tends to complicate and reduce the effectiveness of attempts in academic planning.

It takes no organizational behaviorist to tell us why this is so: Neither the students nor the faculty have a motivation or direct incentive to consider "the overall enterprise." As faculty we have been trained in a discipline to promote that discipline, and we instill this value into our students. How, then, do we break this cycle? How do we find a rationale for that broader "education" of a student which goes beyond the narrower "instruction" of a major or a specialization? Yet ironically, because of the tremendous growth of specialization today, we are beginning to question whether or not an undergraduate major can still be relevant, given the massive amount of information and skills a student is expected to acquire in a few short years. The recent study on curriculum prepared by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching quoted above observes, "Since it is impossible for any college or university to expose its students to all available knowledge, perhaps the basic objectives of the curriculum will be to provide students with skills for lifelong learning. These will include the ability to analyze written and spoken ideas and exposition, to use computational tools properly, to integrate information gathered from more than one source to produce new conclusions or observations, to test the validity of conclusions, and to use knowledge to solve problems."[5] There is the basic paradox: faculty, and hence their students, have been and continue to be trained in often highly specialized disciplines; at the same time we are now being told that some undergraduate majors, because of the rapidity

with which certain fields are changing, are becoming less relevant. When the educational system provides professional rewards primarily for excellence within a narrow discipline, how, then, do we develop a sensitivity towards the indirect benefits of a larger, supposedly more integrated curriculum which some now call upon us to provide?

A little historical perspective may help. Our curriculum today still reflects changes which took place seventy to a hundred years ago, during a period which Laurence Veysey calls "the only genuine 'academic revolution' yet to be experienced within the United States."[6] Higher education saw during the period between 1870 and 1910 the final decline of scholasticism and the rise of the then innovative practice called the "major." The American major (and through it the resulting impetus towards uniformity for the first time in our system,) was "by no means a simple matter of imitating the German university."[7] Many differences remained, but the key, the emphasis on research in a defined discipline, established the department system which has grown to dominate the American academic scene today. Faculty are usually trained only within a discipline, and then most universities reward them for continued contributions to one or more highly specific sub-specialties within that discipline.

In fact, so great is the role of faculty specialties in the design of a curriculum, that one can easily raise a very fundamental question: for whom has the college or university really developed? Frederick Rudolph answers rather pessimistically, "The institution is really not for the students, after all, but for the professors."[8] Whether or not we agree with Rudolph's stark observation, we can nevertheless agree that our students are influenced by the goals or the priorities which an institution's professors have set. As these goals include a very high priority for the acquisition

of knowledge or skills related to a specific discipline, Christopher Jencks and David Riesman find that it is no wonder our students enter college often for very narrow reasons: "The majority of those who enter college are plainly more concerned with accumulating credits and acquiring licenses than with learning any particular skill while enrolled."[9] Rudolph, in an attempt to challenge us further, even questions whether or not we have a true curriculum: "Perhaps there is no curriculum either, only an assumption of burdens and discrete programs for carrying them out: an accidental compromise between the only partially understood past and the unanticipated future."[10] In any case, because of the strong role of the major departments in the academic milieu, we can certainly agree with Rudolph's suggestion that intentional comprehensive planning may not only be lacking, but by the very nature of the system such planning may be practically impossible to stimulate.

Through the wording of their general education requirements, many current undergraduate programs clearly demonstrate their discipline orientation. They require students to take so many credits of English, social sciences, mathematics, arts, science, foreign language, etc. In other words, what a student is expected to acquire is described by the discipline area itself. Many schools have begun to recognize the weakness of this tradition, and have tried to "student-orient" their curricular descriptions through statements of anticipated "outcomes." Many examples are available, but most would include such areas as basic skills in learning processes (communication and quantitative logic), social, cultural and environmental perspectives, the ability to analyze problems and to make moral and ethical decisions, and knowledge of a professional or an avocational discipline.

An "outcome" approach to curriculum design does have indirect benefits for the faculty, also. Professors are forced to rethink the value and impact

of their own disciplines. Departments may rediscover the importance of cooperation, as well as the sometimes forgotten common roots of many subject areas. Such a focus away from the discipline may also help to reduce an often fanatical fixation by many faculty (as well as by some administrators) on the "credit hours generated." Tradition, however, has great strength. It also has some virtue. It represents a synthesis of great ideas and considers sub-consciously the contexts within which those ideas were born. A devised system, such as the outcome-oriented description, may represent one set of ideas imposed at a given moment within a limited context. It contains all of the strengths but also the weaknesses of human thought, which is bound by time and undeniably affected by present milieu. Judgement is still out on the success of outcome curricula, but we need to consider it here as a valuable focal point in our search for a change process in curriculum development.

Nothing social ever remains in a fixed state, except, perhaps, change itself. But what can motivate a directed look at this change process? What incentives provide for faculty interest in examining, in particular, the modification of the non-major curriculum? For one, the pressure of near certain reductions in general college enrollment during the 1980's and 90's will cause many departments, especially the so-called "non-relevant" ones in a vocational sense, to re-examine their own major programs. This energy could conceivably be channeled into a concern for the entire genre of non-applied courses and their basic relationship to curricular purpose. It appears to me, therefore, that an attention to the change process should start at the "top," at that point from which one perceives most easily the inter-relationship of all of the academic parts: ". . . institutional leaders /should/ prepare analyses of their institutions to determine, as accurately

as possible, the present situation and the factors shaping the future course. These analyses should be used to inform their colleagues and constitutents, and should be part of a larger effort designed to create attitudes receptive to and conditions conducive to change."[11] The next step would require the acceptance of the process by the institution's faculty, based upon their awareness of their larger educational responsibility. The acceptance, however, will inevitably confront the traditional value placed in autonomy of the department and in the strength of the discipline-oriented curriculum.

If we can agree that three thrusts basically still divide the contemporary college curriculum -- the major (depth courses), general education (breadth courses), and free electives -- and that faculty hold an investment in their individual courses, the department in the major, and the student in the available choice of electives, no one, it would appear, claims responsibility for general education. In some institutions, it is the department, ironically, which has assumed a responsibility for general education. In such cases we typically see the addition of a multitude of discipline-related support courses. Because they, too, focus on the major, most students will not develop those higher cognitive skills which the perspective of a non-related area of study would provide. With each passing year since the beginning of this major-oriented century, we have seen more deeply entrenched departmental incapacity to provide appropriately effective breadth in its general education: "Concentration was the bread and butter of the vast majority of the professors, the style they knew and approved, the measure of departmental strength and popularity. Breadth, distribution, and general education were the hobby horses of new presidents, ambitious deans, and well-meaning humanists of the sort who were elected to curriculum committees by colleagues as a gesture of token support for the idea of liberal learning. When that gesture collided

with the interests of department and major field, only occasionally did the general prevail over the special."[12]

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has most recently caught the ears of the academic community with such warnings as these: "The erosion of general education on America's campuses is even more severe than its share of curricula might indicate, for in many cases it is poorly defined and is so diluted with options that it has no recognizable substance of its own."[13] Such prestigious cries, plus the undeniable statistics which show a marked decline in basic learning skill proficiencies, has caught many institutions unprepared to deal effectively with the problem. Few schools have the resources, especially in this period of stabilizing or declining enrollments, to modify rapidly this deterioration of non-discipline skills and awarenesses. Even fewer have developed an effective planning strategy which could operate in a climate which prefers immediately relevant, applied courses and programs. An apparently overwhelming task now lies before many institutions, if indeed they opt to accept the challenge. Institutional leadership must be made aware of the intricacies of the problem, and the faculty themselves must be "taught" to understand the mode of non-departmental thought.

North Dakota State University, a rather typical land-grant university of medium size, found its students were infected with the same, common deficiencies in verbal and quantitative skills which appear to have spread nationwide. Furthermore, its professional and technical colleges and departments, as well as some of its humanities and social science faculty, are pushing even more strongly for more complete jurisdiction over all portions of the curriculum, and are making inroads into assuming more responsibility for general education wherever possible. The institution has

no real built-in checks to stem the tide. Its only university-wide general education requirement includes just three quarter credit hours of physical education or ROTC. Its colleges have nearly complete autonomy in curriculum planning, including the determination of all the basic learning skills, and any commonality evolved partly through tradition or sometimes just by accident. The Vice-President for Academic Affairs first expressed his concern for the situation, and began on his own a program to develop a procedure for academic planning. He asked a faculty member with some administrative experience to assist him by heading a series of task forces, each to deal with specific, identifiable deficiencies. The faculty assistant decided upon a strategy based upon the Carnegie Foundation observation that "curriculum reform of significance requires (1) overall thought but (2) piecemeal action."[14] The first task force dealt with communication skills, a second with quantitative ones. A third project to develop an inventory of university-wide curricular outcomes has just begun. The project starting points were staggered, so that the even more important change process could be carefully developed; the second task force would learn from errors of the first, and so forth.

The Task Forces on Communication Skills divided their work into several steps: the first committee, composed of both faculty and administrators, 1) developed its own understanding of the problem and its significance, then 2) recommended a general faculty awareness program to include a survey of verbal activity in all courses and a major conference on communication skills with speakers and panelists from outside the university. The second group, actually established by the Faculty Senate Academic Affairs Committee, recommended specific changes: first broad based minor modifications in administration and faculty attitude, in competency description of existing communication courses, and in individual faculty approaches to their own specialized content

courses; then a move towards centralized competency standards and measurements. Several months later, a faculty Task Force in Quantitative Skills followed. It plans to employ the same initial steps of committee and faculty awareness. Both projects have tried to emphasize, if only to the task force members themselves, a need to avoid preconceived conclusions and to follow academic method as much as possible.

The planning process intended to help faculty as well as many administrators to gain confidence in working with a non-disciplinary mode. This confidence was enhanced by the use of academic method. The task force members accumulated and studied materials in the field, invited respected instructors from a wide spectrum of disciplines to testify, communicated their concerns and solicited advice from appropriate state public instruction officials and from members of the business committee of the region. Slowly general observations and conclusions evolved. They did not always coincide with the expected ones, but when they did, the task forces' reports and recommendations gained greater credibility with the faculty at large. The task force felt that a process of categorizing their final recommendations by responsibility (administration, faculty, and students) would encourage the larger participation needed. Given their institutional context of lumbering, bottom-heavy autonomy, the members felt that a "top-down" approach would yield the quickest results. The central administration would in public voice its support for increased competency in basic learning skills, while encouraging, but not requiring, reallocation by the colleges and departments to support faculty efforts. Faculty members each were then expected to reinforce verbal (and will later, most likely, also support quantitative) learning within their course content wherever applicable, rather than "pass the buck" on to the obvious departments of English, Communication, Speech, and Mathematical Sciences.

Once the institution was confident that faculty attitudes were more receptive to the non-discipline approach, and that appropriate support courses were effective, it was felt that any competency measurements on a university-wide basis would have a better chance of motivating, rather than threatening, the students to practice these skills as effective tools in all content-oriented courses.

Even though the projects have not yet terminated, some obvious satisfaction with the process has been assured. Choosing the members of the task forces not only for their interest in the topic but also for their respectability among their peers helped establish a degree of prestige. This heightened sense of responsibility, further enhanced by the Vice-President himself formally inviting the participants and opening the initial sessions, helped lead to a commitment "to the cause," or as one person put it, "we were charged to make recommendations, and I feel we had better come up with something good." This attitude, along with the members' basically reasonable nature, appeared to repress, at least in the initial stages, the disciplinary biases of all, while they still maintained respect from their college and departmental colleagues. Furthermore, their natural desire "to show up the administration" by their academic approach and their insight was harnessed by the leader to maintain an esprit de corps necessary for such a time-consuming project. The overall planning strategy, however, was prepared in the Vice-President's Office. It included the development of short and long term agenda alternatives, which worked subtly to tie faculty and administrative purposes together. One cannot underestimate the importance of this key activity. Any committee spreads about the anguish (in a philosophical sense) of decision-making; but as it disperses responsibility, it also deviates its direction. Direct administrative guidance would have threatened faculty members, but no

plan at all would have threatened the success of the project itself.

This delicate tightwire approach of working through a faculty member attached to a central administrative office also has its weaknesses: as this individual does not have any "official" administrative authority, the effectiveness of the task force leader depends entirely upon the personal respect and cooperation offered by the other committee members. Yet, given the relatively few alternative approaches available, the process of centralized planning combined with faculty task force implementation can effectively promote wide-spread sensitivity to the issue at hand, and in doing so it can increase the possibility of significant faculty participation in change itself.

A strategy of "overall thought but piecemeal action" cannot anticipate the realization of preconceived objectives in all cases; rather it is effective in motivating the raising of underlying issues, so that the entire university community will consider a broader perspective, and in this case, examine its role in the total undergraduate curriculum. The process is slow, often tedious or even frustrating. The members of the committee must themselves be taught the issues first, before they can develop enough useful insight to make the decisions eventually necessary. Success also depends upon the leader's understanding of various campus political sensitivities as well as of the unpredictability of human nature. Success relies, furthermore, upon a strict adherence to the principle of thorough communication with all possible constituents. The task force members were asked at nearly every meeting to consult completely with their peers, whenever possible, before firming up their own opinions. "Hidden agenda" itself became a principal agenda item. As the process had greater long range importance than the actual outcome, the leader tried to balance the flexible with the strict in procedural

issues: important were member attendance, preparation, and consultation; less important were the rules of parliamentary procedure -- consensus rather than democracy of the majority reigned. And whenever feasible, various alternatives were set forward in detail to allow for the maximum of choice as well as for fall-back positions, should consensus not be reached on the initial proposal. Yet, one must keep in mind that the "overall thought but piecemeal action" approach does focus on limited scope projects. One must not expect quick radical change. This limited scope has another great advantage: it takes into account the cycle of effectiveness of any organization or group, helping to prevent staleness or over-confidence on any given issue.

Limited experience in an "overall thought but piecemeal action" approach to academic and more specifically to curricular planning has shown the potential effectiveness of the process, which is not a simple one to master. It requires a balance of two apparently contradictory approaches: flexibility of options within a commonality of purpose. To accomplish this balance, which depends substantially upon an awareness of human and social characteristics, the approach demands strong, central guidance, which is implemented in a subtle, non-threatening manner. The step-by-step change procedure emerges inseparably from a continuity of planning commitment and reliability in an effective communication network.

It would be foolish to believe that any structure to promote an effective process is faultless. All human institutions show a strength or a weakness only equal to the personal strength or weakness of its members. Yet, several possible models exist which could help promote the "overall thought but piecemeal action" process. These range from the least to the most highly structured, but all rely upon some form of central leadership:

1) The "enlightened" faculty-member-led task force can readily evoke peer respect and cooperation in many cases. But it may also suffer from a "credibility gap," a minimal confidence, especially from deans or stronger departmental administrators, through a lack of "official" authority. This model relies heaviest upon the individual's knowledge, insight, and appropriate strength of personality.

2) The faculty-administrator, such as a part-time assistant dean or assistant provost, who is situated in a central decision-making office, but who holds simultaneously respect from faculty peers for teaching and/or research, can sometimes straddle the fence and work with care to maintain confidence from both faculty and administration within certain limits. This dual respect, however, tends to run a brief cycle of effectiveness, and requires a series of limited tasks each of which can be accomplished in a relatively short time. A change of task force membership to coincide with a frequent change in task force purpose may be necessary.

3) A formal structure with a non-major or interdepartmental purpose, including both a recognized administrative leader and participating faculty at a level less than a college within the university, may provide a third possibly effective model. A "director" rather than a dean may lead this "institute" of general education or liberal studies, and draw its faculty from all appropriate departments which offer regular supportive "service" courses. The usual arts and sciences core may be strengthened with the addition of home economists, architects, or even engineers, should these departments or colleges offer broad-based courses for the non-specialist. A natural esprit de corps can develop within this model because of the focus of the institute on a specific, unifying cause. The function of the institute, as with all such formal

organizations, could become less effective after a period of time, because of the inevitable fixation of such groups on petty, tangent issues or problems.

4) A fully developed college within the university, led by a dean on a par with the regular academic deans, gives the greatest organizational strength to the issue of non-major curriculum development. Much as the institute, the college model would draw its faculty from many disciplines and know no academic departmental boundaries. The general education or the liberal arts college idea is, like the other models, not a new concept. The University of Utah, for one, has employed this principle with some success for several years. The college's strength, however, is also its weakness. It tends to threaten other academic colleges, and could even promote possible splits of opinion among members of the same department. While it helps break down the purely specialized orientation of a department, it could very easily become itself a "top-heavy" administrative octopus, clearly depending on the wisdom and foresight of its dean in order to remain viable.

Obviously, no one model (or others to be developed) can show a universal advantage. The tradition of an institution, the characteristics of its faculty, the history of cooperative efforts in the past, and especially the strengths of each model's leader, all contribute to success or failure. Yet, one thing is certain: an "overall thought but piecemeal action" change process clearly requires two feet firmly planted -- one in strong central leadership, and the other in grass roots faculty confidence.

Because of the traditional focus of higher education curriculum on departments, a process to examine and integrate easily an institution's non-major-related outcomes into curricular planning is not inherent in most

systems. The departmental approach tends to restrict the availability of natural incentives for students as well as for faculty to want to consider the institution's total mission. When needed change is felt, few comprehensive institutions have a process available which does not threaten a department's sense of autonomy. In these cases, one may consider the very existence of an effective change process more important than the modifications actually implemented. The key to the development of such a process is to provide a profound sense of tactful direction and coordination from the top down, from a respected overall perspective, which will alert the more sensitive faculty members to the absolute necessity of their role in planning and execution of a "breadth" or general education program. An "overall thought but piecemeal action" approach can help. It focuses on specific, definable tasks. It also relies upon the confidence placed in an often changing group of peer faculty, but sustained through its development by some sort of central coordination. The degree of formal organization may vary, depending on certain internal institutional characteristics. But the particular structural mode, although flexible in composition, should adhere to a unified purpose: the promotion of total institutional commitment to curriculum balance, through a specific examination of the role of that part of a baccalaureate student's academic experience which develops intellectual skill and knowledge <u>beyond</u> the limits of a specialized major.

Notes:

[1] Michael D. Cohen and James G. March, Leadership and Ambiguity: The American College President, The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (New York: McGraw, 1974), p. 3.

[2] The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Missions of the College Curriculum: A Contemporary Review with Suggestions (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978), p. 18.

[3] Howard R. Bowen, Investment in Learning: the Individual and Social Value of American Higher Education, The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), p. 270.

[4] Missions, p. 10.

[5] Missions, p. 120.

[6] Laurence Veysey, "Stability and Experiment in the American Undergraduate Curriculum," in Carl Kaysen, ed., Content and Context: Essays on College Education, The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 1.

[7] Veysey, pp. 3-4.

[8] Frederick Rudolph, Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636, The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), p. 3.

[9] Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, The Academic Revolution (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 61.

[10] Rudolph, p. 24.

[11] The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, More Than Survival: Prospects for Higher Education in a Period of Uncertainty (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975), p. 87.

[12] Rudolph, p. 253.

[13] Missions, p. 184.

[14] Missions, p. 16, note 15.